

linger by ToAStranger

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Summary:

It's New Year's Eve and Steve doesn't want to face Billy Hargrove or the feelings he has for him or the signs he's been ignoring with Nancy and Jonathan-- but here he is, doing it anyway.

Or: Another look into the "lattes and love songs" universe.

linger

Author's Note:

- For [brawlite](#).
- Inspired by [peppermint flour](#) by [brawlite](#).

SHOUT OUT TO MY BABE BRAWLITE FOR KEEPING ME UP AT NIGHT WITH THESE TWO IDIOTS WHO ARE DEFINITELY TOTALLY NOT IN LOVE. NOT AT ALL.

Second in the 'verse here on AO3. Tried to fill in the gaps for those who don't follow my incessant screencapping on Tumblr. Enjoy!

When Nancy and Jonathan told Steve that they had full intentions of dragging him out on New Year's Eve, he hadn't expected much more than their usual spots. The gastropub down off 5th, or the club where Jonathan is *friendly* with the DJ downtown, or even the dive bar down the street from Nancy and Jonathan's place.

He isn't expecting them to show up at his place, while he's in the middle giving Dustin the rundown on making sure Binx doesn't freakout-- *your cat is more anxious than you, Steve* -- during the fireworks, and drag him out to *O'Sullivan's* instead. Steve has to bite down hard on the inside of his cheek as Nancy links her arm through his, as they trot up to sidewalk to the entrance to the pub, and she looks so eager to be trying someplace new that he doesn't have the heart to refuse her.

Steve's never been very good at refusing Nancy Wheeler. Not really.

The problem is that Billy works at *O'Sullivan's*. Which, granted, wouldn't usually *be* a problem if it hadn't been for what had happened, the weekend after Christmas and the peppermint cookies, when Steve had gone and let it get ten kinds of fucked up.

Steve had, stupidly and naively and hopefully, invited Billy up to Mariano's Orchard after Billy had offered to take Steve *for a spin in*

his girl -- his girl, of course, being a gorgeous blue vintage Camaro. While the trip up had been good-- *great* , even, filled with laughter and banter and stupid, ridiculous singing-- Marco and Anna Mariano, old family friends of Steve's mother, had plied them with too much port and food and mead. They'd ended up staying too late, heading back down the mountain well after it had begun to snow, and with a storm rolling in, with the winding roads, and with the tires not kicking up enough traction as the ice set in, Steve had--

Well, Steve had panicked. He'd panicked and gotten caught up in his own head, in his own memories, of a car crash from half a decade previous, and he'd made Billy stop. And Billy had. Stopped and found them a room at a little lodge just down the road and hadn't asked Steve about any of it.

They'd ended up snowed in for the evening, drinking and playing cards in a cabin with no other entertainment than board games. And whether it was the bottles of mead they'd drank between games of canasta, or the cozy heat of the cabin with the snow falling and falling and falling outside, Billy had cornered Steve in the kitchen, between one bottle and the next, and kissed him senseless, tasting like honey and lemon and blackberries-- right up until Steve had *pushed him away* .

" *You're drunk* ," Steve had said, breathless and *aching* with want, but *knowing* with everything that he was that Billy wasn't thinking straight, that he wouldn't be doing this sober, no matter how much Steve *wanted* him to. " *You're drunk, and-- and I'm drunk, and... I don't want to risk you hating me in the morning, Billy* ."

Steve had ended up spending the night curled up on the small couch by the fireplace, insisting that, since Steve was the reason they were stranded in the first place, Billy get to take the single bed the cabin offered. Come morning, there were stiff pleasantries and then a quick, quiet ride back into civilization.

Ever since, things had been... not awkward, but certainly strained. Billy still shows up, daily, at the cafe. They still talk. But there's a certain distance now, a new kind of chasm that's opened up and spread between them.

Steve hates it. Hates it and feels guilt, like tar churning and churning and *churning* , in his stomach everytime he thinks about Billy's face, in that cabin, after Steve had broken away.

And he hates the look of surprise on Billy's face when he walks up, two hours before midnight, sandwiched between Nancy and Jonathan.

And he probably hates himself a little bit, too.

"Harrington," Billy says, lingering at his post just inside the front door, like it's a question in and of itself. "I didn't think you ever stepped foot outside of that little coffee shop of yours."

Steve offers up a tight lipped smile. "Hey, Billy. Rough night?"

Billy's eyes flit-- to Nancy, to Jonathan, and then back to Steve. "Not yet."

"Steve," Nancy frowns up at him, tucked against his side. "You didn't say you knew anyone that worked here."

"Slipped my mind?" Steve tries, and Nancy rolls her eyes.

"I've seen you around the shop," Jonathan says, and Billy eyes him, smile tight and not kind. "Hargrove, right?"

"ID," he says, instead of taking Jonathan's offered hand.

Jonathan flusters a bit, then digs into his back pocket for his wallet. He hands it over and Billy eyes it critically, squinting at Jonathan's face before finally passing it back. Steve wants to call him on it, knows that Billy knows exactly who Jonathan and Nancy are and how old they are, but he doesn't. Doesn't feel like he really has a right to call him out for anything.

Though, when Billy turns his eyes on Nancy, Steve nearly laughs. He feels Nancy go stiff, feels her bristle, but Billy holds out his hand expectantly and Nancy eventually gives and passes her driver's license over as well with a puff of her cheeks.

"You not gonna card me?" Steve asks, tries to tease, when Billy's

handed it back and Nancy is stuffing it into her purse.

And Steve is surprised when Billy leans forward, smiles with sharp white teeth like he might swallow Steve whole, and says:

“Do you *want* me to?”

He thinks it might be a double edged blade. Thinks about Billy staring at him in a kitchen in the mountains, hurt and angry and mouth bruised, after Steve had said *you could realize that you don't want this* and Billy had replied *don't tell me what I want* .

He chews on the inside of his cheek, drops his eyes, and tucks his hands into his pockets. “Nah,” he says, practically to his shoes. “I think I’m good.”

Billy blinks, leans back, and his lips purse. “Well, go on in, then. You’re holding up the line.”

The pub is about as packed as you’d expect a bar to be on New Year’s Eve. There’s a crowd at the bar, and nearly all of the tables are taken, but Nancy manages to bully her way into a hightop as Jonathan steps away to get them all drinks. There are pool tables, all along the back wall, and a stage where a live band would play just beyond the dancefloor.

The music is surprisingly modern. Steve doesn’t think that it’s a regular aesthetic decision, but one made for one of the busiest business nights of the year. He bobs his head along to some 90’s jam, laughing when Nancy eagerly leans across the table to tell Steve *I love this song; I haven’t heard it since the 6th grade* . Steve thinks he remembers it at one of the hokey middle school dances from their childhood.

Eventually, Jonathan gets through the line to the bar and brings back two beers and a cocktail. Steve wrinkles his nose at the brand, and Nancy rolls her eyes and trades with him.

“You’re so picky,” she says behind her bottle, and Steve sips comically, delicately at the cocktail from the little red straw, good mood lasting as long as it takes for Nancy’s to gesture over to the

door with her chin. “So, who was that guy?”

Steve swirls his drink with the straw, watching the cherry inside dance between the ice cubes. “Just a regular at the shop. His sister is friends with the shitheads.”

“Oh,” Jonathan blinks, elbows resting forward on the table between them, his beer between his palms. “He’s that guy that burned himself a while back, isn’t he? Mr. Americano?”

Steve’s cheeks color a bit. “Yeah, that’s him.”

“He’s cute,” Nancy says, bats her lashes at Steve and nudges him. “You interested in him--?”

“No,” Steve says, quickly, and Nancy rears back a bit, her big eyes a bit bigger.

She shares a look, with Jonathan, and Steve grinds his teeth. Jonathan leans back, takes a pull from his beer, and Steve knows that means he’s about to get some kind of third degree from Nancy.

“No, he’s not cute?” She leans in, and Steve sighs. “Or: no, you’re not interested?”

Both, Steve wants to say, but it would be a lie. Nancy would see right through it.

Neither, but that’s too honest.

“How about: no, I don’t want to talk about it?” he says, stabbing at the cherry in his glass with the end of his straw.

Nancy blinks, lips parting, and it’s not a surprise, the look of shock on her face. It’s not often Steve won’t talk to them about something. Won’t lean on them, use them as his foundation.

He’s done it since high school, after all. Why would it change now?

But Steve thinks about the drive up to the orchard. Thinks about what he talked about with Billy, about the strange nature of his relationship with Nancy and Jonathan, and he thinks maybe he’s

tired of not being enough for the two of them. Of not being equal. Of being someone they take care of when he needs it and nothing else.

"You wanna dance?" he asks, in their general direction, when the song switches over to something more pop heavy.

Jonathan is staring at him too, now, but Nancy kicks him under the table and he shrugs. "Sure."

Steve downs his drink, swallows the burn of gin and whatever else is in it, and gestures over his shoulder.

They file out after him, onto the small dance floor, and quickly find themselves pressed together, Nancy between Jonathan and Steve. It's crowded, packed tight, and Steve wonders if it's always this busy.

One song bleeds into the next, into the next, into the next. By the time Steve is sweating, his feet starting to ache a bit, he's got Jonathan plastered to his back and Nancy at his front. She smiles up at him, now that they're all a bit more loose, and drapes an arm over his shoulder to play with the hair at his nape. He feels Jonathan press a smile to his shoulder, feels his hands squeeze at his hips, because they both know what that look on her face means, what that hand on his neck is meant to do.

Steve leans down, like a muscle memory, like a Pavlovian response, and kisses her cheek. The corner of her mouth. Catches her lips with his.

She hums, relaxes against him, and sways to the beat. Her fingers crawl up into his hair, card through it, and when he shudders at the soft touch, Jonathan squeezes at his hips again.

There's the faintest trace of hops in her mouth, from the beer, when Steve licks his way past the part in her lips -- and Steve can't help but remember the last time he kissed someone had been Billy barely a week before. It makes something sour on his tongue, but he still kisses her, still cradles the small of her back, still groans when Jonathan inevitably goes for his neck.

He hopes, for once, that he doesn't leave a mark.

When they part, Steve is breathless and Nancy is flush. He can feel Jonathan at his back, the heat of him and the weight of him, and it's comforting. For a moment. For as long as it takes for Jonathan to reach past Steve to get at Nancy, for Nancy to slide around Steve and press to Jonathan's chest, and the transition is easy-- normal-- but it doesn't stop the pit of *cold* that settles in his stomach as he watches Nancy smile, dreamily, up at Jonathan, or the soft way he touches her cheek in return.

"Gonna get another drink," Steve says, tries not to make it too obvious he's running away, and then beats off the dancefloor and over to the bar.

Colin, the bartender, ends up sliding Steve one shot, then another, as Steve orders them and downs them quick. His hands are shaking, he realizes distantly, and *god*, he wants to get drunk and go home and curl up with Binx-- forget the New Year, forget Nancy and Jonathan, forget everything.

He feels like, maybe, he's on the edge of a revelation. That, after years of pining away, maybe he's finally going to take Dustin's advice and *move the fuck on*. He orders another shot.

"Rough night?"

Steve glances to his right, finds Billy leaning there, wincing like he hadn't meant to sound like an asshole but sounding like one anyways.

Steve shakes his head. "Just figured out my New Year's resolution."

"Oh?" Billy asks, tries for curious instead of mean, and Steve wishes they could go back to their easy talks over coffee and too many sweets instead of this stilted approximation of a conversation.

"Giving up on bad habits," Steve says, more to himself than anything, thinking about Jonathan and Nancy, who are still dancing to *Every Little Thing She Does Is Magic*.

"Trying to max out on them now?" Billy asks, brow up as Steve

knocks back the shot Colin places in front of him.

“This isn’t a bad habit,” Steve says, eyes Billy, can see the moment tension ripples through him, and slaps down a twenty for his drinks. “Can I bum a smoke off of you?”

Billy’s brows fly up. He stares at Steve, for a long moment, and then leans over the bar to holler at Colin. “Put Sean on the door. I’m taking my break early.”

Colin nods, and then Billy is leading Steve out, toward the back door, and Steve doesn’t bother with a backward glance. Follows Billy, because he thinks if Billy wanted him to, he’d follow him anywhere.

They step outside and it’s cold. There are small flurries, falling down from the dark sky, and they find themselves a place in the alley outback for Billy to light up two cigarettes and hold one out for Steve. He takes it, drags on it, and slumps back against the brick wall.

“Thanks,” Steve mutters, eyes on the toes of his own boots.

Billy grunts, blows out smoke, and huddles more fully into his jacket. “This a bad habit too?”

Huffing a laugh, Steve shakes his head. “I don’t do it enough for it to be a habit.”

Above them, in the skyline, there is a flare of light. A *pop* of sound. Steve squints up at the sky as sparks erupt over the stars in green and blue and gold.

“They’re early.”

“Nah,” Billy waves a hand in front of his face, clears the smoke, and opens the door a bit to sneak a peek into the bar, The Cranberries bleeding out into the night with them. “Got about five minutes to countdown.”

He looks to Steve then, eyes a bit sharper, like they’d been when Steve walked up. Steve feels that guilt in him stir.

“Wanna head back in? Ring in the New Year with your friends? I’m sure they’ve got a kiss waiting for you.”

Steve winces, wets his lips, takes one last drag and then stamps out his cigarette with the heel of his boot against the pavement. “I wouldn’t be so sure,” he says; hates that it sounds like he’s whining.

When he looks back up, Billy is watching him, frowning. Dolores O’Riordan is crooning somewhere in the bar.

But I’m in so deep.

You know I’m such a fool for you.

Steve sucks in a shuddering breath, shoves off the wall, and offers a tight smile. Shoving his hands into his pockets, Steve steps closer, back molars grinding as Billy’s jaw clenches.

“Thanks for the cigarette,” Steve says, steps closer still, and places a hesitant, soft kiss to Billy’s cheek. “Happy New Year, Billy.”

Jaw going faintly slack, Billy stares at him as Steve pulls back. As he steps away. As he back down the alley, toward the street.

“Happy New Year,” he mutters, and Steve’s smile goes a little more genuine, a little more easy.

And as he walks away, leaves Billy behind, leaves Nancy and Jonathan behind, he hopes. Hopes that the new year will bring good things-- to himself, and to Billy too.